

International Affairs Forum Interview

May 30th, 2006

By Dimitri Neos

Julia E. Sweig is a Nelson and David Rockefeller senior fellow and director of the Latin America studies program at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#). She is the author of numerous scholarly articles, opinion pieces and congressional testimony on Cuba, Colombia, Venezuela, Latin America, and American foreign policy and has also directed several Council on Foreign Relations reports on the Andean region and on Cuba. Dr. Sweig's *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Harvard University Press, 2002) received the American Historical Association's Herbert Feis Award for best book of the year by an independent scholar. Her latest book is [*Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century*](#).



International Affairs Forum: Your book, *Friendly Fire*, focuses on anti-Americanism, particularly as it relates to countries that have historically been friends. During what time period do you see this shift occurred against America?

Dr. Julia E. Sweig: The question that I try to answer with this book is: How is it possible for one president and one war to so successfully galvanize global opinion against the United States in such record time? My view is (and the polls demonstrate this) that starting around 2001 to 2003, anti-American views outside of the Middle East started to crystallize. They galvanized since then as a result of the unilateralism of the Bush administration policies, the Kyoto treaty, the ICC and the Article 98 issue, Abu Ghraib, weapons treaties, etc.

All this blew the lid off a jar that had been contained during the Cold War and afterward, especially because the United States drew the wrong lessons from the outcome. Primarily, we took the attitude that since we were the last guys standing, we must have the political and economic model that the rest of the world wants to emulate. That assumption proved to be incorrect, and recipes we put into place like globalization and democratization tended not to work as well, especially in the developing countries. All these factors have proved to hurt the United States in the eyes of the international community.

IA-Forum: If the United States were to withdraw from Iraq, would it help?

Dr. Sweig: No. Iraq was a huge part of our loss of credibility, not only because of how badly Iraq has gone but also because of distortions about WMD and diplomacy leading up to the war. Iraq has also exacted a drag on our capacity to be seen as providing global public goods on other major fronts. Iraq is the great sucking sound.

If we leave Iraq, we won't get much credit, because nobody gave us much credit for going there. The global public opinion pretty much rejected the war, so however we leave, slowly or quickly, Iraq will be in various states of disrepair, chaos and quasi-political stability.

While we won't get any kudos for leaving, it would enable us to put our political, economic, military, and diplomatic resources, severely limited by our involvement in Iraq, toward the other major global issues that need attending. We probably need the work of another generation to right what has transpired over the last few years. and Iraq won't do it alone.

IA-Forum: What is the effect that the new media/internet/CNN world had on anti-American sentiment, through the large amounts of information and disinformation that's readily available?

Dr. Sweig: The media's a big part of it. It's a 24/7 news environment. Governments cannot control what others know about them, so everyone knows what everyone else is doing. The capacity for information and disinformation is immense. If we had only three television news channels, we'd still have a similar dynamic because the policies that caused this backlash and structural dynamics would be there anyway.

IA-Forum: And your prescription for fixing/alleviating anti-American sentiment?

Dr. Sweig: We can alleviate it to a certain extent at the margins. The United States is not going to recover the status that we had at the end of World War II and through much of the Cold War. There are other global powers contending now, so we are not going to be the single superpower forever,

Moreover, we have too many domestic constraints. The American body politic is in a very insular mood right now. We have few American leaders who are willing to make the case before the American public about why we are better off, safer, and stronger when we are an open society – open to people and foreign capital. Americans are very fearful and insecure, not only for their physical security in the aftermath of 9/11, but also on the economic front. They're facing the same pressures and competitions of globalization that developing countries face. They're very nervous about it, and that's seen in the response to the Dubai ports issue and the immigration debate.

Apart from our fiscal problems that are tremendous, we have a mood issue to address with the American public, something neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are doing, and that's a big constraint. I do think that's coming back into the fold. It doesn't mean signing onto Kyoto to the letter, joining the ICC and abolishing our Article 98 demands, and it doesn't mean becoming French. It does mean that if we're going to take an alternative view to the conventional wisdom on one of a number of global issues, we better have a substantively serious alternative to put on the table. We need to be seen as the provider of global public goods.

We'll never overcome the resentment that comes with having a lot of power, but we do have to be a lot more careful about the kind of footprint we leave. Substantively, we can begin to shift things a little bit. Stylistically, there's a reason why our parents taught us about manners when we were growing up. The whole point of manners is to make people who have less power than you feel comfortable and at ease. That's something we have been pretty bad at lately, but we are pretty good about it by and large. It wouldn't be too hard to regain a sense of decency and civility in the way we deal with other nations. I don't want to degrade the important things like political and cultural diplomacy, but they're only as successful as the degree that our underlying policies are seen as credible and legitimate within the international community. That's what's been lost, and we have to recover it.

We also need to be a lot more sober about how about how difficult the pressures of globalization are for developing countries. We need to address our own protectionism so that the trade round and issues related to agricultural subsidies can be jump started. That's an issue where a little unilateralism wouldn't be so bad rather than waiting for Europe and Japan to deal with their subsidies. If we were to perform the hard work domestically to make that happen, that would really help.

As far as immigration goes, we're building brick walls and beefing up security, as opposed to addressing fundamentally that we have jobs here, and there's an absence of jobs in ascending countries. That means that people will come here. That's part of globalization. We need to be looking at that in our immigration debate, rather than the one that appears to be the uniphobia that's been coloring it today.

IA-Forum: How much do think Americans care about anti-Americanism?

Dr. Sweig: It depends on which American you're talking about. There's a poll that's going to come out in the next couple weeks that will show that, at the elite foreign policy level, people care about it a lot. They view the decline in American credibility as a disaster to American interests. They recognize that there's no global issue the United States can deal with on its own, and it needs friends. So I think there's a concern about it, a very serious one.

Among the American people, I think people are pretty defensive and flippant. Many believe that we're just not understood, and take the attitude of "tough if people don't like us."

IA-Forum: A combination of arrogance and apathy?

Dr. Sweig: And ignorance.

IA-Forum: Moving to Latin America...it's a vast resource of oil for the United States, yet the common perception is that the Middle East is our major source of oil. In spite of its importance to the United States, it tends to get far less attention in the public eye. Why?

Dr. Sweig: Latin America is always on the third, fourth, and fifth tier of importance. There's been a long legacy of proximity and neglect. Latin America does not generate the kinds of security crises that have been seen in the Middle East or Russia during the Cold War. It's not just the American public that doesn't know that we get forty percent of our energy imports from the western hemisphere. I think the members of Congress and the Executive Branch have assumed – since OPEC and the hostage crisis of 1979 – that all our oil is from the Middle East. It's just a lot of ignorance. Latin America has a place in the American imagination that is one of caricature, by and large.

IA-Forum: With the continuing saber rattling between Venezuela and United States, do you think Venezuela is on the path for inclusion into the Axis of Evil?

Dr. Sweig: I don't think so. We have fourteen percent of our oil coming from Venezuela and they keep investing money. However, I think the rhetoric between the two countries, especially from Venezuela to the United States, is going to continue to stay hostile.

IA-Forum: Anti-Americanism, if not fixed, where will it lead?

Dr. Sweig: The subtitle of my book is “losing friends and making enemies in the anti-American century.” I think we have a window right now to begin to turn things around. I don't think it will happen during this administration. I also think the Democrats would be deluded to think that just getting elected that things will turn around. China's rise will help abate it if the United States is not seen as the only superpower, if we can share the stage again with another large power. That other large power will help absorb some of the animus.

The resolution of some of the big proliferation crises, especially in Iran and North Korea, could help. When there's someone like Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who seems clearly interested in picking a fight, it actually helps. Abating anti-Americanism can especially be helped if others see that serious proposals are on put on the table by us on issues like Iran.

But I would suspect the distrust of the United States, the suspicion of our power, will color the international environment for the foreseeable future.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Dr. Sweig.